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DEPARTMENT FOR PRM, NEA/ELA, DRL/JBARGHOUT
LONDON FOR TSOU
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [SCUL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: DRAFT LAW THREATENS WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Classified By: CDA Raymond D. Maxwell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The SARG is considering a new "personal status" law that many in the human rights and legal communities view as a major step backward for women's rights. The bill allegedly was killed in the parliament and later resurrected by PM Muhammad al-Utri. The future of the bill is unclear, but the secrecy of the decision-making process already has enraged many Syrians. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Syrian Parliament and Ministry of Justice are considering a new "personal status" law that many lawyers and activists believe will bring Syria back to the "Ottoman period," according to lawyer and women's rights activist Daad Mousa (strictly protect). According to the Syrian Women Observatory (SWO), the draft, leaked several months ago to various websites and human rights groups, would reduce the legal age of marriage for girls from 17 to 13, reaffirm that women should not leave the home or take a job without prior approval of their husbands, and discriminate between religious sects in legal divorce and child custody.

¶3. (SBU) The bill was introduced three months ago and has received heavy criticism since then. As a result, Speaker of the Parliament Mahmud al-Abrash reportedly withdrew the bill from consideration on June 29. But on July 2, PM Utri said reports about the bill's withdrawal were false and the drafting committee was still revising it. When the revision process is completed, PM Utri said, the committee will present the bill to the People's Assembly.

¶4. (SBU) Many Syrians are publically critical of the closed-door process lawmakers followed in drafting the law. SWO President Bassam al-Qadi said the law was drafted with a "backward mentality," and MP Muhammad Habbash, a conservative Sunni religious leader, criticized the "secret drafting committee" for not consulting non-Muslim religious leaders. Christian leaders say the passage of the bill would enforce laws contrary to their faith on issues such as divorce and polygamy.

¶5. (C) Comment: Even if the personal status law does not pass, its introduction signals that elements within the SARG leadership are opposed to advancing a liberal women's rights regime. The strong, public opposition to this bill nonetheless demonstrates there are subjects upon which active debate is tolerated. Of note, and in contrast to the bill, is President Bashar al-Asad's recent repeal of the legal protection of honor crimes in response to pressure from women's rights groups including SWO. We are hearing from some of our contacts that elements in the SARG want to keep the bill alive in order to distract civil society activists from other controversial issues, such as the new labor law draft (septel) currently under consideration that has pitted labor unions against struggling public and private industry.

